

The Daredevil Birdman

by Austin Parker
Illustrated by J. G. Stephenson

ZOE DE LORME, who was billed as the "Queen of the Air," was not a person who delivered herself of abstract philosophy in an off-hand manner. She first made sure of her audience and her victim. Zoe sat at the head of the table in Murphy's Eats Emporium, where the performers were finishing dinner.

"I'll tell you what I think," announced Zoe, and allowed her cool gray eyes to travel menacingly about the table. It was a definite command, and silence fell.

Red Luke and Dauntless Harry Myrick were billed as "Plane Changing, Wing Walking, Parachute Jumping, Death Defying." It was over Luke and Myrick, the latter especially, that a bitter discussion had been raging.

"I think," continued Zoe, "that there are some things which ain't to be forgave." Her red lips curled angrily and her voice was crisp. "And one of them things—her eyes settled upon Dauntless Harry Myrick. 'Is being slow in the head.'"

Myrick shifted slightly in his chair and scooped up the last of his pie with a fork.

"Is that so?" he muttered. "There's a wise crack for you. 'Is that so?'" she mimicked. "Dauntless Harry Wise-cracker!"

Bill Harrah, whose chief possession in this world was a half-trained, nasty-dispositioned leopard, said, "Aw, dry up, Zoe! Dry up! Zoe de Lorme, who was nominally his employee and actually his boss, turned upon him, her gray eyes gleaming.

"I'll salt you down," she said. "You're a nice boy, Red. I like you. You're a regular fella!" She stroked his arm ingratiatingly. "You ought to have a better partner than that dried-up little shrimp."

"That's all right," Zoe said. "Don't get it into your head that Harry Myrick's any dummy."

Red Luke made no response. "I'm mighty sick of Bill Harrah," continued Zoe. "He wants me to marry him. But he ain't got no nerve. He used to handle lions, and one of 'em took a chunk out of his leg. Since then he ain't had no nerve at all. Gosh, I like a man with nerve!" Her gaze was admiring, flattering, and Red warmed beneath it.

She moved closer to him. "Say," she went on. "I'd like to get into this air-o-plane game. I'm sick of animals and Bill Harrah. I got a nerve, Red. Let me take a crack at it. I can do all that junk that Harry Myrick pulls. Huh? Red?"

"Aw, you don't want to—"

"Sure, I do! An' I want to team up with a regular gent! Let me take a whirl at it! Will you, Red?"

"Maybe," he shifted uneasily. "I wonder where Harry is?"

Dauntless Harry Myrick had been directed to a poker game at the local undertaker, the proprietor of the cigar store where they played, a telegrapher, a man who said he was on the road for a hardware house and a jockey who was riding at the fair. Harry Myrick sat between the salesman and the jockey.

The salesman complained of the draft and then closed a window. Harry Myrick shuffled the cards. Out of the corner of his mouth he quietly asked the jockey: "You heeled?"

"Tickler," replied the jockey. Myrick began dealing the cards. It was a small pot, won by the owner of the store, and the cards went to the salesman. He paused in his shuffling to sniff and to dab at his nose with his handkerchief—then, as he was on the verge of dealing, his face began to contract for a wrenching, explosive sneeze.

Myrick knicked the jockey, not because of a scratch on his ankle, not because it itched, but because he kept his knife—his tickler—strapped to the knife of his leg.

The salesman was convulsed by the violence of his sneeze and his hands jerked back into his lap. He was just regaining his breath when Harry Myrick's right fist swept across the table, caught him squarely on the mouth and sent him backward to the floor in a shower of cards.

Instantly Myrick was upon him and the room was in an uproar.

"Are you there, kid?"

"I'm here," answered the jockey, back to back with Myrick—an eight-inch knife waving the others away. Suddenly the salesman subsided. Harry Myrick felt the man's pockets and pulled forth an automatic. Cat-like, he was on his feet, back against the wall.

"I'll plug the first man that lets a yip out of him," he announced. "Pick up those cards an' count 'em. This bird was plantin a cold deck on us. You got a lot of brass—you bum hay-shacker!—to think you could pull that sneezing game on me!"

"I'll call the police and have him locked up," volunteered the proprietor, starting toward the door.

"You stay where you are!" ordered Myrick. "We'll look through your pockets next!"

THERE were one hundred and four cards upon the floor. The salesman's pockets revealed two more decks, one of them cold for a six-handed game and the other used deck. On a ledge under the table there was a similar layout, sufficient to involve the proprietor of the cigar store, even though his own pockets were clear.

Myrick, the jockey, the undertaker, and the telegrapher relieved the two owners of all the money they had and split it four ways. It was plain frontier justice, and Harry Myrick was presiding magistrate.

"If you let a squeal out of you we've got two local witnesses to swear that better tell that partner of yours to lay off, or I'll give him something he'll remember."

Harry Myrick took a long draft of beer and signed once more. "Gosh, you're a tough too, ain't you?"

"Don't pull any of that stuff on me," Harrah flared up. "I'm telling you, and when I'm telling you—watch out! And as for that red-headed partner of yours—"

"Oh, choke it off!" ordered Dauntless Harry Myrick wearily. "Listen, Harrah, I only weigh a hundred and thirty-three, but there ain't an ounce of me that ain't sick of your line. I'm tellin' you. Me?" He prodded his chest. "I'm tellin' you! I've fought everything that'll fight, includin' wildcats an' missin' links. I fought 'em with everything there is to fight with—guns, knives, teeth, feet an' stone hatchets. An' tonight I'm aching for a fight. If you want to start anything, start it right now or shut up!"

Bill Harrah's glaring puffed countenance hung motionless over the table. Myrick rose and stretched.

"An' if you start anything with Red Luke," he continued, "I'll take what's left of you an' put you to bed with your dirty leopards. Laugh that off, you punk!"

HE strode from the room and up the street, feeling relieved of at least some of the day's accumulation of venom. Murphy's Eats Emporium was deserted, except for Red and Zoe de Lorme, who sat talking with their heads close together. His greatest emotion, as he passed the restaurant and made his way toward the center of town, was a comforting presentiment that he would have a good knock-down-and-drag-out fight before the night was over.

In Murphy's Zoe was saying: "You're a nice boy, Red. I like you. You're a regular fella!" She stroked his arm ingratiatingly. "You ought to have a better partner than that dried-up little shrimp."

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Feeling strangely at peace with the world, the tumultuous emotions of early evening stilled, Dauntless Harry Myrick idled down the street, whistling his contentment to the waning moon. From Red Luke's room in their lodging house came a swelling psalm to sleep.

It was after one o'clock the next afternoon when Myrick hopped from his bed.

He stood before the streaked mirror of the bureau, and counted his gains of the night before. Seventy-eight dollars in velvet!

He grinned at his reflection and thumped his lean ribs in elation. From his throat to his left hip he wore a jagged bluish scar. A Sulu had given that to him with a knife. Also there were two dimples where bullets had entered. "The flesh is rubber and the heart is zinc!" was his favorite description of himself in relation to the various lethal weapons which had been tried upon him since the day he ran away from home with a circus.

Red Luke had already left the house. Myrick went to Murphy's Eats Emporium, where he ate a combined breakfast and lunch with Bub Jennings, one of the dirt-track team.

"Say, Harry," demanded Bub, "what's the big idea of lettin' 'em razz you like they did last night?"

"Everybody has to shoot off his face a little once in a while. I do it. But—Myrick paused—"when a lady begins tellin' me what a big bum I am, I—oh, I dunno—I just don't know how to answer back to ladies. I don't understand 'em. Me an' ladies never got along overmuch."

The team of Luke and Myrick was scheduled to perform at 3:30, and it was close to that time when Harry and Bub Jennings sauntered toward the fair grounds.

The plane swept up from the field as they paused, a few feet within the gate.

"Probably goin' up for a test," said Myrick in answer to Bub's questioning glance. "Passenger maybe."

They crossed the race track and Bill Harrah came charging down upon them.

"Red's taken Zoe up for some stunts," he announced angrily. "That's all right," Harry Myrick went into the long frame shanty that served as a dressing room for the men. From his trunk he brought out white flannel trousers, white shirt, shoes and socks. He was nearly dressed when Harrah found him again.

"Say, listen," Harrah began in a voice which quavered. "Zoe's standin' out there on the wing. She'll kill herself! Say, can't you make 'em stop it?"

"Aw, buck up! She's all right," Myrick went to the door and watched the plane. Zoe was out on the wing, sure enough—waving to the grandstand. She was trying to pull his stuff! Resentment shot through him. She couldn't do any of his stunts, he knew; but, also, he knew that a girl has the bulge with the audience.

He turned his back upon Harrah and walked away. "I'll show 'em!" he muttered belligerently. "I'll show 'em who's wing walker around this joint!"

If Zoe de Lorme wanted war, she'd get it!

SITTING on the forward edge of the lower wing, legs dangling, white blouse fluttering and snapping in the wind, Zoe gazed speculatively at the landing gear beneath her—an axle and two wheels, with their supports and wire braces. She fingered the rope which she had wound about her waist.

From this same point on the wing, while the plane was resting safely upon the ground, she had studied the axle, calculating footholds and handholds, and it was curious how far away, how unattainable it had become, now that they were 3,000 feet above the earth. The propeller sliced the air viciously, sending back a cyclonic wind blast which she had not counted upon.

The idea of weakening, or of compromising in the slightest, did not enter her head. She covered her hesitation by adjusting her bandanna, which was drawn tightly about her head, then grasped a strut, turned and felt in space with her toe for the axle.

Red Luke slapped the throttle shut and the noise of the motor died. "Hey!" he yelled. "Where you goin'?"

"Underneath. I'm all right. G'wan!"

"Hey! Listen! You don't—"

But Zoe's confident smile and bandanna disappeared over the edge of the wing. Red leaned from the cockpit and caught a glimpse of her, sitting upon the axle.

"Hang on!" he yelled. "While I get some altitude." A wave of her hand answered him. He drew the throttle open gradually, fearful of dislodging her, and then commenced to climb. With their altitude of 3,000 feet regained, he leaned out once more—just in time to see her start down the rope, which she had tied to the axle. He could see that she had looped the other end of the rope about her ankle.

Apparently she was planning to go down the rope—perhaps dangle there head downward, waving the handkerchief which she held in her mouth, while he circled over the grandstand—then climb up again.

Harry Myrick had done the same stunt the day before—only he dropped from the end of the rope, fell several hundred feet and opened a parachute.

As her hand let go its grasp upon the bracing wire she turned in the wind blast and began to spin like a top. The proper way to do it was to go down rapidly and get out of the propeller stream.

Red slapped the throttle shut. "Go down or come up—quick!" he shouted.

Red caught a glimpse of a tensed face, white except for the stark incongruous splashes of rouge upon her cheeks.

She was clutching the rope desperately, hanging it; then dizziness sapped her strength and she slipped downward. Yards below him, at the end of her rope, she swung in space, huddled into a little ball.

The earth was approaching rapidly. "Zoe!" shouted Red. "Zoe! Hang on! I've got to go up again!"

With the engine pulling she commenced to turn more rapidly. Her head bobbed weakly.

Red, sick with fear, was holding the plane in a steep climb, staring down at her, horrified, when her grasp upon the rope slackened. With black unconsciousness flooding her mind, she toppled over limply. The jerk of her body against the rope sent a shudder through the plane. The bandanna slipped off and her blond hair streamed out in the wind.

Red Luke gasped.

To make a landing now would mean scraping her life out upon the ground, and yet a landing sooner or

later was inevitable. There was not a chance in the world of her recovering her senses while she dangled, spinning, by one leg.

Red took the last chance and shut the motor, hoping that she might recover herself in a minute or so of easy, quiet gliding. He flattened the slide as much as he could, to prolong it; but the earth moved up toward him impassively. In despair, he pulled up and dragged her aloft once more.

BILL HARRAH, trembling and in tears, had set out upon Harry Myrick's trail when he saw Zoe de Lorme shift her position from the wing to the axle.

"Keep your shirt on!" advised Myrick. He borrowed binoculars from the manager of the fair. "She's all right—she's all right—don't worry, Bill—I tell you, she's—Hey! Hey!"

A vast, sharp "Ah!" came from the audience—an expression of satisfied desire for a thrill.

"She faints!" exclaimed Myrick. He dropped the binoculars upon the ground and glanced about him frantically. Men were coming toward him on the run.

"Come on!" he yelled, beating off the desperate clutches of Bill Harrah. With the others behind him, he attacked a white tent dressing room. Wrenched by two dozen pairs of hands, the tent went over as though a storm had struck it. It was uprooted and dragged to the center of the field.

"Wave it!" ordered Myrick. "Signal!"

In the swarm of faces about him, Myrick saw Bub Jennings. He charged down upon him. "Get that car of yours out on the track! Quick!"

Bub Jennings bolted for the inclosure where the racing machines were parked.

Myrick continued on his way to his dressing room where he snatched up a long knife which he used to cut loose parachutes in the air. Rising above the hubbub of voices, he heard the crackle and roar of Bub's engine. He ran out, found the special police battling with the mob that sought to swarm over the track and field.

"Keep 'em off! Get 'em off!" he screamed. "Back! Back!" The battered gray racer, veteran of a thousand races, came thundering upon him and he swung aboard.

"How fast on straightaway!" he yelled into the driver's ear. "Seventy-five—eighty! Rotten turns!"

Myrick nodded. "Stop at half mile!" he ordered, stripping off his white shirt.

He stood up, one foot in his seat, the other braced against the gasoline tank, clutching Bub's collar for support, and waved the shirt above his head.

At the half-mile post the car stopped, and he stood motionless studying the plane. The wings were rocking, and the distant beat of the motor died.

"He's got it!" yelled Myrick. "Go on! Give him your speed on the home stretch! We'll make him second time around!"

As they turned into the straightaway Bub "gave the gun."

Red was coming down in a sweeping glide, Zoe swinging beneath him. The racer skirted the outer fence at the three-quarters, gathering speed,

and swung into the home stretch under full power.

Myrick, braced against the pressure of the wind and the pounding of the wheels upon the track, grabbed Bub's collar once more and arose in his seat, with his right hand clasping the knife.

He could see Red, peering over the edge of the fuselage, gauging speed and distance, dangling his limp, sprawling burden on the end of the rope closer and closer to earth.

Zoe de Lorme was directly above him, tantalizingly out of reach, so close that he could almost touch her hand. The plane and the racer swept down the track at the same speed. Then Red Luke settled a few feet closer.

MYRICK grabbed the girl with his left arm, bore down heavily upon her to keep the rope taut, and slashed. Locked together, they went down in a heap, and it was only Bub's quick snatch at them which kept them from tumbling over the edge of the small bucket seat to the track.

Brakes ground and shrieked. The car skidded, narrowly escaped plunging into the fence, and rolled up before the judges' stand. A doctor was waiting for Zoe.

A little later Harry spoke to Red. "I'll hand it to her that she's got the nerve," acknowledged Dauntless Harry Myrick. "She's got nerve—plenty of it—but she's short on judgment. An' her thinking that she could pull my stuff! Tryin' to crab Harry! Hawlin' like a sea sick trout, he was—an' usin' me as a blotter!"

He squirmed into a clean white shirt, and coiled about his waist the rope upon which Zoe de Lorme had dangled.

"Mon," he said. "Time for us to give a show. Ought to be up five minutes ago."

"What're you going to do with the rope?" asked Red.

"Stick around an' find out," answered Myrick without deigning to give him so much as a glance. As he stepped from the shanty a burst of applause shook the big frame grandstand. And the band struck up a march, keeping time with him as he strode toward the plane.

Red Luke followed humbly.

They swept skyward, and Dauntless Harry Myrick made his way to the upper wing, where he sat unconcernedly, gazing about the country and whistling as he uncoiled the rope. He motioned to Red to drive the plane away from the fair grounds; then, well out of range of eyes, he tied the end of the rope to

do to it as other yrs. as this winter only 1/2 of it caved in. Person I don't in no hurry as I agree with the U. S. tennis ass that a man can't write and play tennis both and it is a whole lot less trouble to write because when you play tennis you half to wear special white shoes and pants and shirt but you can write in a kimono and slippers and in fact some of the best writing has been done entirely bare foot.

Three of the 4 kiddies was born in the spring time so we been having quite a orgy of birthdays and generally always when they's one in sight we ask the hero of same what he would like for presents and he always says a pony or a sail boat or a parrot or something else that they ain't no chance of him getting.

But the 2d boy is different and today is his birthday and we asked him a wk. ago what would he like and he says he would like a bicycle which would clean the rust off his bicycle. That is the way he has always been and will always be the same way, not wanting nothing and nothing is probably what he will get.

The Mrs. decided a while ago that it was time for the kiddies to get a new vehicle to ride the kiddies bus and 4th. to school and back as the one we had been using for that purpose the last 3 or 4 yrs. was acting kind of sullen so we called up the man and told him to bring around a so and so and we asked him could we trade in our old one and he looked at me and kind of swallowed hard but says yes but he would half to take it over to Port Washington to get it appraised.

So we was scared to death for a 1/2 day as Port Washington is 4 miles from here and the betting was when the good old wagon would never complete the round trip, but she done it all right and the deal was closed and the papers signed and now the kiddies is squawking because all the fun has been took out of their daily trips to and from school.

They always insisted on setting in the back seat of the old car and about 2 days out of every 5 the machine would part in the middle either going or coming and when the driver got to school or home and turned around to let them out they wouldn't be there but would be a mile or 2 up the road in the back 1/2 of the car, laughing at him. The car is supposed to seat 5 people, but if they are all intending to get to the same place together I would advise every body to get in the front seat.

That is about all the Great Neek new only that everybody is tickin' on acct. of the spring rains being over which means that the electric lights will probably stay on pretty regular unless they's a breeze or it gets cloudy or something.

A few days of warmth and sunshine certainly made the estate look beautiful when all the flowers and blossoms was out. All told they was in bloom one time (4) hyacinths, in bloom one time (4) tulips and the fruit orchard. The last named is unlikely hid behind the garage so as the picnic parties can't enjoy it. Last yr. it yielded pretty near a strawberry box full of plums which come as a big surprise as when we bought the place they told us it was a cherry tree.

Annual work started last wk. on the tennis court. The men promise to have it ready by Sept. this yr. as they ain't no whoppers near as much to

the two struts on either side of the engine. That done, he stood up, facing forward, pulling upon the rope with both hands as though he were holding reins.

He balanced there, slightly crouched, feeling out his position, testing the spring of his leg muscles. He took a single turn of the rope around either hand then, apparently satisfied, he turned to meet the inquiring gaze of Red Luke, and gave him the signal to loop the plane.

Instead, Red throttled the engine. "What?" he demanded in a yell.

Myrick turned again, disgustedly. "You ought to know your signals by this time! I said to loop 'em'!"

Again he resumed his crouching position, tugging on the rope.

THERE was a moment in which Red hesitated, then they slipped into the swift gliding descent which comes before a plane noses skyward in a loop.

Red hated to do it. But wasn't it a slogan of Luke and Myrick, Death Defiers? "We will try anything, anywhere!" Neither of them had ever proposed a stunt that the other would not try. The spirit of partnership had never been so strong within him as it was in those few seconds while he watched the spare, thin figure of Harry Myrick riding the upper wing of their plane. "Riding her as though he was glued there!"

Up and over they went, with Myrick's wiry legs bending ever so slightly to take up the shock of the turn.

As the plane swung down on even keel again, Myrick looked around and grinned. He motioned with his hand to have the motor shut off, and sat down upon the wing, facing Red.

"Wanted to try it out here where nobody could see me," he drawled. "Didn't want to make a darn fool of myself by fallin' off with the crowd watchin' me. Let's go down an' do it right in front of the grandstand. Right smack in their faces! The closer the better!"

Red too was grinning; but there was admiration, loyalty, written over his face.

Dauntless Harry Myrick studied him for a moment good-humoredly. "There is some things," he quoted slowly, "which ain't to be forgave!"

He planted the rubber sole of his shoe in Red's face and gave a friendly push. "An' one of 'em," he added, "is bein' slow in the head!" Like you?

At last they headed back toward the fair grounds, to perform a stunt which was heralded to the world.

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and swung into the home stretch under full power.

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